

# Employment structures, employee attitudes and workplace resistance in neoliberal Poland

The Economic and  
Labour Relations Review  
2017, Vol. 28(1) 91–112  
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DOI: 10.1177/1035304617694798  
journals.sagepub.com/home/elrr



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## Abstract

During the past quarter century of neoliberal social, economic and political upheaval in Poland, the structure of workplaces has changed, and so have changes in worker attitudes to workplace and social solidarity. This article explores the links between changes to organisational and employment structures and shifts in worker attitudes, focusing on the implications of attitudinal shifts for the capacity for organised workplace resistance. It documents a loss of collective identity and a growth of individualism and social distrust. The analysis is based on publicly available economic and social statistics and the author's own qualitative and quantitative research, drawn in part from computer-aided interviews in de-industrialising Lower Silesia. Evidence is provided that the extent and intensity of attitudinal shifts have varied according to changed workplace structures, based on privatisation and organisational size, and especially on the accompanying changes in workplace culture and climate. Increased individualism, based on formal decollectivisation, has been accompanied by attitudinal individualism and distrust of other people and social institutions. As a result, declining capacity for workplace resistance and an increased sense of powerlessness have increased workers' susceptibility to right-wing propaganda.

**JEL Codes:** J82, J83, J21

## Keywords

De-collectivisation, employment structure, individualism, Poland, right-wing propaganda, social solidarity, trust, union strategy, workplace climate, workplace culture, workplace resistance, workplace size

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## Introduction

When the systemic transformation of Poland began in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Polish workers – being surprised by the new market ideology that spread across Eastern Europe – presented fairly ambivalent approaches to the systemic changes taking place in the public arena. Generally, they were shattered as a social community. Since the early 1990s, their attitudes to the new order have been slowly changing and becoming more critical, but their significance as collective actors has been decreasing. This growing weakness was also related to the declining status of trades unions. In their approach towards the surrounding environment, they adopted more and more ‘privatised’ (rather than collective) strategies for action. Such strategies included withdrawal from participation in group activities in order to defend or improve their own positions. Individual actions included changing one’s place of employment, acquiring additional qualifications and certificates, or trying to improve personal relations with their employers. In the social dimension, such actions led to an increase in conformity, and a breaking of not only class but also personal ties among employees. Engagement in collective conflicts is now likely to be avoided, as from the point of view of a single employee, such action can adversely affect his or her own situation.

However, this tendency proceeded at different paces depending on the type and size of workplace. Sociological analyses usually take into account position in the social structure, education and age, as well as the cultural models enacted, in order to explain the attitudes of individual groups or communities. Here, a further explanatory factor is proposed. It is argued that the nature of the workplace can also be an interesting factor in explaining behaviours and views. Alongside size and sector, variations in workplace culture are also significant in shaping attitudes. It turns out from the analysis of large-scale interview evidence provided that a workplace can be defined not only by its organisational culture but also by a certain type of workforce atmosphere, opportunities (or lack thereof) to express one’s own opinions, potential ease (or difficulty) in establishing a trade union, a more conservative or more progressive political climate prevailing among employees, the frequency of violations of workers’ rights and, finally, the potential to create staff resistance.

The article begins with an outline of the context of changes in Poland and their workplace effects, contributing to theorisations of the relationships among work structures, work climates and modes of resistance. An explanation of the data sources and research methodology follows. The data analysis section involves qualitative and quantitative cross-referencing of primary and secondary empirical evidence from sources that include published public opinion survey results, and the author’s focus group interviews and large-scale computer-aided interview research. Cross referencing the theoretical and empirical evidence, a typology of links between workplace characteristics and worker attitudes is developed. In terms of practical implications, the article concludes that developing grass-roots participation in workplace democracy will become a necessary defence against the growth of extremist right-wing groups in Poland.

## Theorising the context

### *Structural change and union density*

The collapse of the Eastern bloc in Europe coincided with the structural transformation of global capitalism. These changes forced trades unions in Eastern Europe and other parts of the world to transform and renew their structures and review their approach to organising (Barnes and Markey, 2015; Heery, 2015). However, under Polish conditions, this was done in a specific historical context. Not only did ‘real socialism’ collapse but also the legend of the Solidarity trades union movement (Polish: NSZZ Solidarność) was coming to an end, giving way to brutal ‘shock therapy’ in the socio-economic order.

The structural changes in the Polish economy not only changed proprietary relations but also led to changes and diversification of staff attitudes. In 1990, more than 52% of all employees worked in the public sector and over 47% in the private sector. By the end of 2013, only 23.7% of people worked in the public sector and 76.3% in the private sector (Główny Urząd Statystyczny (Central Statistical Office) (GUS), 2014). The more structural transformations in the economy and the wider privatisation of factories, the weaker trades unions became in Poland. Although weaker, trade unions continued to operate in former state-owned enterprises, but in the private sector, they were established with much difficulty or not established at all. As Kallaste and Woolfson (2009) remarked in relation to three Baltic post-communist states, ‘you can’t want what you can’t imagine’, and for this reason, many workers in Central and Eastern European countries tend to fall into a non-unionised ‘representation gap’.

Czorzasty et al. (2014: 114–115) identify two periods after 1989 when trades unions in Poland were particularly weak. According to these writers, the initial phase of membership decline occurred in Poland between 1990 and 1993. The decline was mainly due to the first wave of the privatisation of state-owned enterprises. The second wave of accelerating deunionisation arrived in 2000. It is likely that growing unemployment combined with the re-entry of NSZZ Solidarność into parliamentary politics were factors behind the increasing velocity of the deunionisation process (Czorzasty et al., 2014). These processes did not occur at the same pace everywhere. According to Mrozowicki (2010: 244–245), efforts to develop a comprehensive image of workers after the systemic transformation in Poland tend to ignore the internal differentiation of the working class. Trades unions operated in different conditions depending on workplace, and worker behaviour varied in different situations.

However, the presence (or absence) of trades unions in enterprises is not the only factor that affected staff attitudes. The model of the workplace and the type of work may also have indirectly increased or inhibited staff integration, ability to undertake social actions and attitudes:

Large-scale production involves a high level of work organisation and gathers large masses of workers in one place. Working conditions create a spirit of collectivism, solidarity and joint initiative in them. These abilities are not so much developed, for example, in people employed in the trade sector due to their considerable dispersion. A lower range of socialisation of means of exchange and transport compared to large-scale means of production affects ways of thinking, behaviours, values and aspirations of those who work with them. (Tittenbrun, 2012: 487)

Measures of union density in different economic sectors support this analysis. In 2001 (12 years after the systemic transformation), 7% of adult Poles declared themselves members of trades unions; among active professionals, this percentage amounted to 13%. While unions managed to survive in large privatised businesses, they usually ceased to exist in small privatised plants. In most companies established ‘from scratch’ by private capital (both Polish and foreign), there were no trades unions at all (Gardawski, 2001: 59–64). This process has continued with the passing of time.

As in other countries (e.g. Australia) where the number of trades unionists decreased and new strategies and campaigns were initiated to rebuild the relationships between trades unions and employers (Heery, 2015; Kaine and Brigden, 2015), the major trades unions in Poland, OPZZ and Solidarity, tried to adapt to the new conditions. By the end of the 1990s, NSZZ Solidarność established a Union Development office (DRZ), whereas the second biggest union, formerly the ‘official’ socialist confederation, OPZZ, founded the Confederation of Labour, with an explicit aim of organising non-unionised workers (Mrozowicki et al., 2010: 225). It was discovered, however, that these activities were not very effective. They ran up against the difficulty that restructuring was reducing workplace size.

In the light of this analysis, the purpose of the present article is to investigate attitudinal barriers to, and enablers of, employee collectivism, and their links to the structure and climate of employing organisations. Such an understanding is critical to the development of effective approaches to building industrial democracy and employee voice, moving beyond individualist indifference to, or support for, social polarisation and the rise of anti-democratic movements.

## **Methodology**

The original research underpinning the analysis that follows was a study conducted between 2012 and 2014 using computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI).<sup>1</sup> This research involved 1006 individuals employed in enterprises and belonging to one of four categories defined at the research design stage and treating workplace size as a relevant variable differentiating working conditions. The groups of respondents included

Employees of large private foreign companies whose organisational patterns had been transferred from their parent companies employing more than 500 people, except for top executives – 250 people;

Employees of large companies with a majority of state capital or the capital of privatised companies maintaining the share of the State Treasury, employing over 500 people, except for top executives – 250 people;

Employees of public administration or local governments, except for elected or appointed job positions – 250 people (administration);

Employees of Polish private companies from the small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) sector excluding micro-enterprises – 250 people.

The surveyed workers came mainly from the south-west of Poland (Lower Silesia) and were selected through purposeful sampling according to their place of employment. Thus, the sample is not representative in statistical terms, but it can be said that the trends captured in the study did not differ from the general situation in Poland.

The south-western region of Poland is one of the most industrialised parts of the country. Like Silesia, Lower Silesia was home to a strong working class in the communist period and the economic transformation was very distinct in these regions in the early 1990s. In Silesia, it led to a radical transformation of entire industries (like mining and metallurgy), which then became less significant. In Lower Silesia, entire cities diminished (e.g. Wałbrzych).

In addition to the quantitative research (CAPI), focus group interviews were also conducted with employees. However, the material gathered during the qualitative research has been used to only a small extent in this article.

This evidence is cross-referenced to published findings from research undertaken by Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej (CBOS) (the Centre for Public Opinion Research), as well as to already-published evidence drawn from earlier interviews conducted by the author (Żuk, 2008), and conceptual constructs developed by other theorists.

## **Workplace size and sector: Impact on collectivism**

By 2014, 6% of CBOS survey respondents and 12% of wage earners declared membership of trades unions. Density by industry was 16% in mining and manufacturing, 5% in construction, 12% in transport and communication, 7% in trade and services and 10% in administration. Most trades unionists (23%) worked in education, science and health care (CBOS, 2014a). There was a simple correlation between workplace size and union density. Only 6% employed in companies with up to 50 workers belonged to trades unions, 13% in companies with between 50 and 249 workers, and 28% in companies with 250 workers or more (CBOS, 2014a).

The Silesian survey results show that attitudes to collectivism varied with workplace size and sector (Table 1). Despite the declining role of trades unions overall, as many as 55% of those employed in state-owned companies felt, 25 years after the systemic transformation, that trades unions protect the interests of all employees. By contrast, only 32% of employees in small and medium-sized private companies thought that trades unions protect all staff. Why was this the case?

First, if unions are non-existent or weak in small and medium-sized private companies in Poland, they will have limited capacity to protect workers' rights. Second, direct contact and informal direct supervision are predominant in smaller companies. This reduces social trust within a workplace and reinforces private strategies (rather than team-oriented ones).

Third, the issue of trust is a broad problem faced by Polish society (see, for example, Growiec and Growiec, 2011; Sztompka, 1999). It is not limited to workplaces where people are often afraid to express their opinions, but also relevant in other collective life situations. CBOS (2016) research titled 'Public Trust' showed that, based on a January 2016 poll of 1063 adults, strong or moderate trust levels were felt by around 80% of respondents for charities, 70% for the Catholic Church and 56%–60% for North Atlantic

**Table 1.** Assessment of trade-union activities by workplace size and sector.

How do you assess the operation of trade unions in your workplace?	Place of work				
	Foreign (n = 250)	State (n = 250)	Administration (n = 250)	SME (n = 250)	Total (n = 1000)
Trade unions are more directed by the company interests than by the staff interests – they go hand in hand with the management	31.0%	30.5%	36.1%	29.7%	32.4%
Trade unions care only about their members	17.2%	14.8%	23.1%	37.9%	19.8%
Trade unions take care of the interests of all employees	51.8%	54.7%	40.8%	32.4%	47.8%

Source: Author, telephone survey, Lower Silesia, 2012–2014.

SME: small and medium-sized enterprise.

Treaty Organization (NATO), the United Nations and the European Union (EU). On the other hand, only 37% expressed high or moderate levels of trust in aspects of government and the legal system, with the lowest trust levels being reserved for trades unions and political parties: 26% and 20% of these institutions respectively enjoyed strong or moderate degrees of trust (CBOS, 2016). Multiple social studies show that the level of social trust in Poland is one of the lowest among all EU countries. When asked the standard indicative question ‘Which of the two opinions is closer to your views?’ almost 80% of Poles regularly chose the answer ‘You need to be very careful in relations with others’ (and this trend has been consistent for many years). As few as 20% people chose the option ‘Generally speaking, most people can be trusted’ (CBOS, 2016). What is more interesting in the context of this discussion is that the greatest degree of distrust towards strangers whom the respondents met in different situations was expressed by the unemployed (75%), unskilled workers (67%), mid-level employees (63%), those with the lowest income per capita (66%) and those with a vocational education (63%) (cf. CBOS, 2014b). These figures show that there are quite a few obstacles in the path to workers’ solidarity.

Fourth, the prevalence of weak trades unions, low trust and informal control in small private companies leads to a greater isolation of individuals who feel that they need to cope with workplace problems by themselves. Isolation is an obstacle to cooperation, which employers can use to ‘keep people calm’ in their companies. These external conditions prevailing in small businesses are conducive to the formation of a specific social entity whom Sennett (2013) calls a ‘non-cooperative self’. Such a person, Sennett argues, is unable to cope with demanding and complex forms of social commitment, and is withdrawn and unwilling to cooperate with others.

The clash of the official neoliberal ideology with practical expectations towards employees seems to be a kind of paradox. At the level of market doctrine and the language used by employment agencies in Poland, employees are expected to be creative,

flexible and assertive. However, in social practice, bosses expect their personnel to be predictable, obedient and passive in completing their tasks, and to show no sign of independent thinking. Structural transformations in the Polish economy were expected to provide this type of employee. The intention was not only to change the structure of proprietary relations but also to disrupt social ties at the level of the workplace and undermine the political role of trades unions. The public sector, however, continued to be a hotbed of strong trades unions and worker associations.

### *Workplace climate and attitudinal change: Restructuring the economy and mentality*

The leaders of the economic transformations in Poland, such as Balcerowicz and other members of the new elite fascinated by neoliberalism, believed that the process of privatisation would form the foundations of capitalism and integrate the economically backward East with the core world economy. Privatisation was expected to create a new model of economic behaviours which would force rational economic principles in workplaces, and create workers and consumers guided by this type of rationality.

Dunn (2004) describes how privatised structures and new systems of supervision were expected to create a new organisational culture and bring about attitudinal change:

In a simple sense, the direct effect of individualising employees is to break up the intractable collectivity of the workforce that was so brilliantly deployed by Solidarity. If employees are judged individually and must compete with other employees on an individual basis, their collective force is lessened. For this to happen, state-owned plants had first to be privatised and trades unions and workers' communities weakened. (p. 35)

Ost (2006) notes the role of Solidarity in enabling the new elites to privatise workplaces without much staff objection:

The paradox, of course, was that as much as workers opposed the effects of the market economy (thus generating anger), they did not see themselves as anticapitalists at all. In line with what their former leaders had taught them, they largely believed, at least for the first postcommunist decade, that capitalism was in their own economic interests. In survey after survey, not to mention inaction after inaction, rank-and-file workers as well as local union officials demonstrated their acceptance of market reform. (p. 180)

Acceptance was due to a simplified vision of capitalism with its fully supplied shops, prosperity and unlimited consumption: bankrupt companies or unemployment could be tolerated in some external reality rather than at a particular workplace. Through a kind of social schizophrenia, at the macro-social level, workers accepted this new official ideology and gave their permission for privatisation. However, at the level of their workplaces and personal lives, this approval was lower. Gardawski (1996) has called it 'privatisation dissonance'.

In ideological terms, the privatisation process was supported by the neoliberal mainstream media in the 1990s. They depicted strikes and social protests concerning economic issues as 'anti-reform' actions. Striking workers (e.g. coal miners and railway

workers) were called ‘the open air museum of the Polish People’s Republic’. Journalists portrayed them as self-centred groups, ignoring the economic interests of the society as a whole. Miners were accused of using blackmail and ‘non-democratic methods’ (Żuk 2006: 59). A research participant, an activist of the Workers’ Initiative, describes the manner in which trades unions are portrayed by the media in Poland:

As for the media, well, the labour code has been dismantled, step by step, for the past 20 years. The media have always supported this process by showing trades unionists as selfish thieves who do not know what they want. Government actions and media coverage seem to be one body. Unionists who want to fight for workers’ rights are shown as parasites in the media.<sup>2</sup>

By these means, pro-social impulses were portrayed as anti-social and individualism was reinforced.

## **How changed workplace structures affected solidarity**

In the early 1990s, Wesołowski (1993) accurately predicted the decomposition of the interests of Polish workers as an organised class and its effects:

Industrial restructuring will differentiate the situation of individual workers and their crews. This will lead to the decomposition of all industries. The protection of interests will be more focused on taking protective measures within an individual company. This will have negative consequences for solidarity within all industries and all classes. (p. 133)

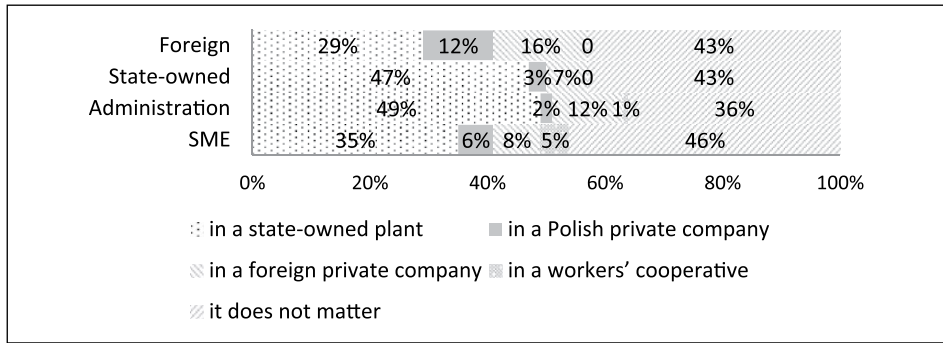
After the passage of years, it can be stated that this is exactly what has happened. Workers themselves did not deny it, but explained the situation in various ways. An employee of the ‘Hutmen’ plant in Wrocław spoke openly about the breaking of staff solidarity:

Strikes have been much limited. Staff bonds are gone. The bonds that united people when life was hard for all of us. They are gone. Here in ‘Hutmen’, we earn quite well. And, for example, if the cables plant is on strike (they do not belong to our federation), we will certainly not support them because we will lose our jobs. They must improve their financial status themselves. It all started from the top. We were put apart from the top. The people in power knew where our strength was. And they started to divide us. Split us. Spread their influences. There will be no powerful grass-root workers’ movement any more. Because people live different lives. Some are worse, others are better. Very poor people will not make a move. Where? Who will support them? Pickets of unemployed people in Wałbrzych. Three hundred or so people? This is a joke. And where are the others? The others will not come. Why should they go there and get exposed? They will look out from windows. These bonds are gone ... (Żuk, 2008: 140)

A worker of the former ‘Polar’ (now ‘Whirlpool’) confirmed Wesołowski’s opinions about the decomposition of staff interests saying,

A huge gap has been created between people. Those who have a good economic standing are kept on a tight rein and sit quietly. Because they do quite well. By contrast, these lower workers have no protection, no support, no facilities to protest. And they end up in poverty, at the





**Figure 1.** Place of work preferred by people employed in various types of enterprises. Source: Author, telephone survey, Lower Silesia, 2012–2014 (n = 1000).

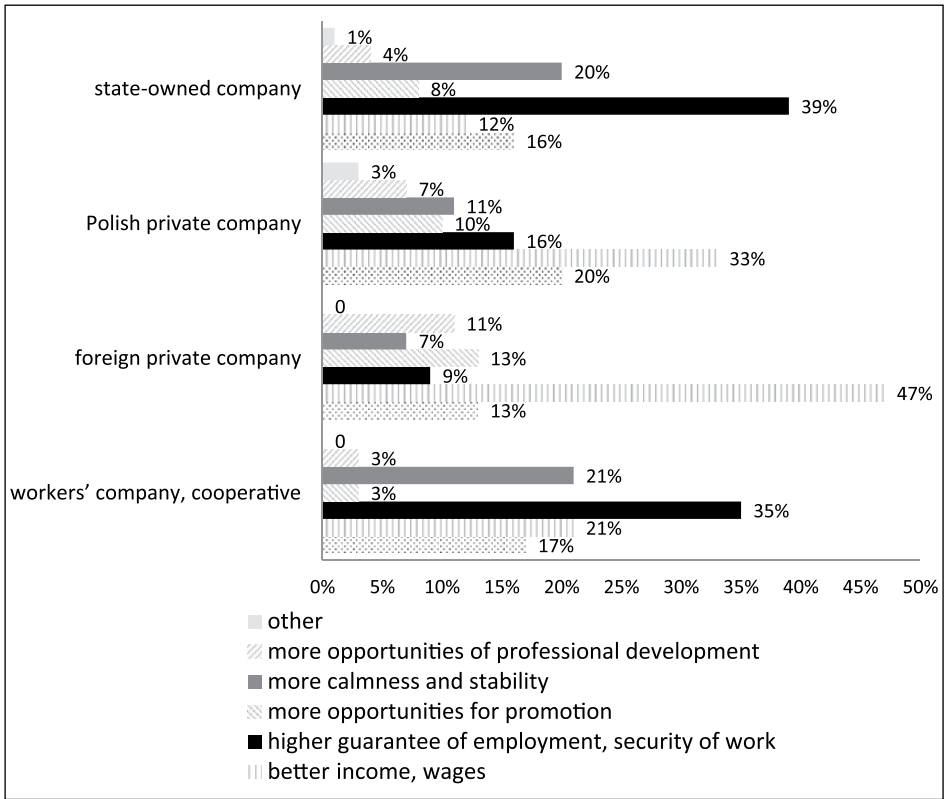
margins of society and cease to respond. They often break down and go on the dole, take welfare benefits. They do not take any action because they do not see any chance of success. Those who have something and work somewhere do not look back at others who are in poverty. Such callousness. Everyone lives one’s own life. (Cited in Żuk, 2008: 141)

### The public sector as a safe shelter from the rough sea of the labour market

In the course of time, it turned out that a safe shelter against the dictates of the market was offered by state-owned plants, public-sector enterprises or businesses which were partially privatised but remained under a significant degree of control by the State Treasury. Even a quarter century after the systemic transformation, state-owned enterprises have remained the most attractive places of work in Poland for the majority of respondents to the Lower Silesia telephone survey (Figure 1). This was despite the mainstream media trying to convince society of the superiority of the market and the private sector since the very start of the transformation. Private companies and foreign private enterprises are rated the worst. The low percentage of people willing to work in a worker-owned company is due to a lack of knowledge of this business model under Polish conditions, rather than reluctance to undertake this type of employment.

When writing about the systemic transformations in the Polish economy, Hardy (2009) has stressed the increasing diversification of not only wages but also working conditions, saying that in numerous new and expanding sectors, changes were made to employment contracts in order to ‘dismantle’ the protection of workers. The result was the development of labour markets based on further differentiation of wages, employment, working conditions and safety of workers.

Apart from wages and working conditions, individual types of workplaces began to differ also in terms of their organisational cultures and staff compositions. Czarzasty (2009) points out that employees of large public enterprises in Poland are middle-aged people earning higher-than-average incomes, whereas remuneration disparities in these companies between men and women are not high. Most importantly, public-sector



**Figure 2.** Employee perceptions of workplace characteristics by workplace category. Source: Author, telephone survey, Lower Silesia, 2012–2014 (n = 1000).

workers are most attached to their workplaces. By contrast, small and medium-sized private companies usually employ younger than average workers who are not attached to their current workplaces and would be most willing to work in the public sector. However, employees of large foreign companies do not want to work in the public sector and gain slightly higher than average income, but remuneration disparities between men and women are considerable there (Czarzasty, 2009: 377–382).

The comments by Czarzasty have been partially confirmed by our surveys (Figure 1). Employees of foreign companies were the least willing of all to work in a state-owned plant (29%). Employment in the public sector was most appreciated by those who already worked there, that is, those employed in public administration (49%) and state-owned enterprises (47%).

With what do employees associate different types of workplaces? According to the telephone survey respondents, the highest security is ensured by state-owned plants and worker-owned companies. These two workplaces were also seen as offering more stable working conditions. By contrast, private foreign companies were seen to bring more income and more opportunities for promotion (Figure 2). Such beliefs were in

accordance with evidence in a 2014 CBOS survey indicating the results of cases of workers' rights violations. In it, a range of infringements of workers' rights was reported more often by respondents employed in the private sector rather than in the state or public sector, and in small businesses rather than in larger ones. Irregular payment of wages was indicated by 4% of all the respondents in private enterprises and by 0% in state-owned plants; coercion to work under irregular conditions was indicated by 20% in the private sector and 11% in the state sector; extension of working time without compensation was a problem for 22% in the private sector and 9% in the state sector; and no freedom of association in trades unions was faced by up to 52% in the private sector and 16% in the public sector (CBOS, 2014a). In general, infringements of workers' rights appear to have occurred less often in unionised plants. Respondents reported almost no delays in payment and no informal economy in this sector. This fact may result not only from the very presence of trades unions but also from the specific nature of plants in which trades unions operate: the strongest unions operate in the public sector.

Responses by participants in the focus groups organised in conjunction with the telephone survey accorded with these statistical trends. When asked about working conditions and the preferred places of employment, typical comments were

We prefer working in the state sector because there are still some social benefits and extras, here we can eat dinner for a penny or something, while the private sector has no such options.

The state sector is the best. The worst thievery is in these companies where presidents, vice-presidents, CEOs, their deputies take billions but pay pennies to regular workers.

People employed in state-owned factories have far better conditions:

Hypermarkets exploit people. These hypermarkets are a kind of novelty which came to us, they exploit people, they are profit-oriented and only top-level managers earn a lot. Take this scandal in the 'Biedronka' supermarket for example. People worked in inhuman conditions there.

Employment conditions in supermarkets, as well as in small and large private companies, increasingly raise the issue of the 'flexible labour market' and its consequences for the behaviour of employed people.

## **Private and collective strategies under 'flexible labour market' conditions**

Problems associated with the establishment of trades unions in the private sector in Poland are not only related to employers' reluctance but also to the prevailing social atmosphere. The strong staff commitment to their workplace that can be observed in state enterprises was less in evidence in small and medium-sized companies, probably because of very high turnover and exchange of personnel. Employees may not know each other because new ones come all the time and former co-workers are gone. This phenomenon hinders a sense of community and works against the formation of social resistance:

Even the most routine, uninspired, and uninspiring, dull and often demeaning work favours the growth of stable, solidly rooted and durable human bonds only if (and because!) it is expected to last for a long time to come – in practice, infinitely. The feeling that ‘we are all in the same boat’ and in all likelihood will remain in that boat whatever happens – weathering storms together and together enjoying smooth sailing – propels and fosters the search for the most satisfying or the least oppressive mode of cohabitation ... (Bauman, 2005: 65–66)

High staff turnover is the result of ‘flexible forms of employment’. This term denotes a variety of civil-law contracts that replace permanent contracts of employment. These new types of contracts include commission contracts, short-term contracts and temporary contracts – all of which are commonly called ‘junk contracts’ in Poland. They make it easier to dismiss employees and reduce staff costs. A recent labour market monitoring report (Randstad, 2016) afforded Poland the highest place in Europe for labour turnover. Up to 29% of the respondents reported that they had changed their workplace in the past 6 months.

In addition to a high level of staff turnover, work organisation makes it difficult to establish any closer social contacts, and starting any joint social activities is even more difficult. For example, in the focus group discussions, people employed on the basis of flexible contracts mentioned that breaks at work are not organised as in other (traditional) workplaces (in the form of one lunch break shared by all). Breaks are organised for different staff groups at different times to prevent any ‘unnecessary’ conversations between employees from different departments.

As a rule, conversation is considered the first step towards social integration and, therefore, managers in many private companies in Poland are suspicious about it. Some topics of conversations are completely taboo. These include wages and political issues. Some employees reported that when concluding their employment contracts, they had to sign a pledge to not talk to anyone about their earnings. This phenomenon appears quite common in the private sector in Poland. A nurse, who was a member of the hospital trades union, commented,

We work in an atmosphere of fear. If you don’t like something and dare to say a word, they say: ‘You can quit the job; there are 300 people outside the gate, eager to take your job’. This is how they reply. Besides, people more often denounce others – those who wish to have better relations with their superiors denounce other employees. So people are afraid to talk about their salaries, or that they don’t like something about the company and about politics, because they don’t know what their boss’s views are. (Focus group interview)

Flexible start and finish times of individual employees, which are practised in many companies, also prevent what took place in Poland during the communist period: several thousand workers left their workplaces at the same time, and leaflets that were distributed among them pushed this impersonal crowd to demonstrate their discontent. As Sennett (1998) writes,

Time in institutions and for individuals has been unchained from the iron cage of the past, but subjected to new, top-down controls and surveillance. The time of flexibility is the time of a new power. Flexibility begets disorder, but not freedom from restraint. (p. 59)

At the present time, it is also the location of new companies and plants that makes social interaction difficult. They are usually situated beyond city and town centres. Urbański (2014) claims that the development of special economic zones in Poland has contributed to the workforce fragmentation:

The location of new factories generally prevents workers from getting together and communicating with each other. They are transported to and from stand-alone pick-up points and car parks. These areas are usually located outside populous and busy city or town centres but in their relatively close neighbourhood, close to motorways and express roads. (p. 211)

Their fear of directors and managers (45.7%) and general fear of trade-union membership and its consequences (31.9%) were, according to the staff surveyed in the telephone survey, the main reasons for their failure to establish trades unions in private companies in Poland (Figure 3). Other causes included a lack of faith in the efficacy of trades unions and a reluctance to take any collective actions (21.5%).

Staff supervision is no longer based on external political control (as it was in the communist era). Although some employees talk about the scourge of denunciations, which further breaks down the ties between employees, the prevailing supervision system is one incorporated in seemingly neutral management technologies. In practice, however, as is claimed by Dunn (2004), these technologies have transformed Polish workers into market-rational invisible entities of post-Ford neoliberalism. According to her, such technologies deprive workers of their social surroundings, devalue their personal contacts, make their family situations immaterial and reject their moral convictions regarding commitments to interpersonal relations. Workers are tasked with changing themselves into 'privatised individuals' so that they stick to narrowly defined norms in their economic behaviours. Dunn adds that the regulation of such privatised people is also privatised as the self-regulation of individuals who, without state interference, behave in accordance with the reproduction of the economic order.

Figure 4 shows that 30% of respondents had not seen any kind of pressure exerted by employees on managers, and only 5% had encountered any strike action. More interestingly, however, there was a correlation between the type of workplace and pressure (or a lack thereof) on managers. Staff strikes had not been organised at all in 49% of foreign private companies and in 54.5% of Polish small and medium-sized companies. The fraction in state-owned companies amounted to only 6.5%, and in public administration, it was 11.6% (Figure 5). It can be seen clearly from these results that the problems and sense of injustice faced by individual employees in the private sector do not automatically add up to a collective grievance, and are much more difficult to turn into the 'common cause' of their entire crew.

## Is a community achievable?

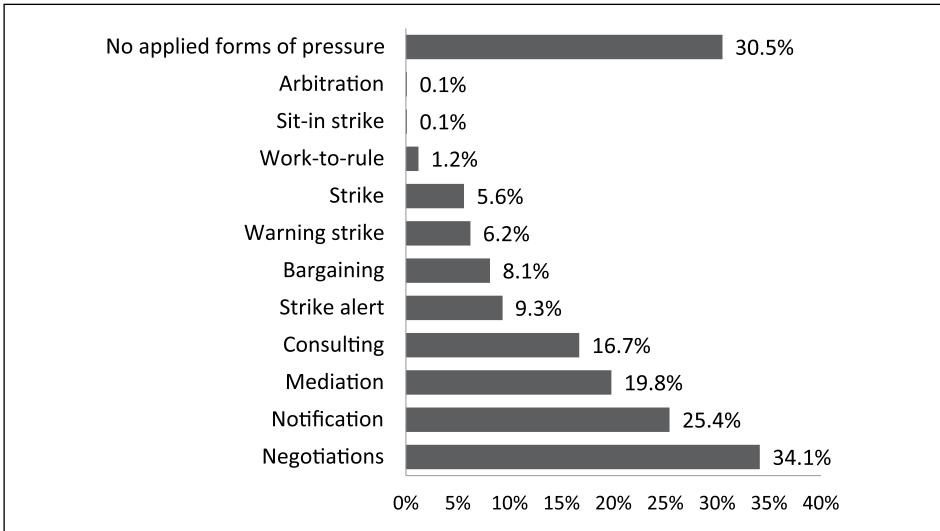
A sense of reciprocity and minimum trust are needed to establish a community (even a temporary one). As pointed out by Sennett (1998), a crisis of trust can manifest itself in two ways: 'Rather than mutual suspicion, there is an absence of trust' (p. 141). The former takes place when employees 'outsourced' from private employment agencies turn up



**Figure 3.** Reasons for lack of trade-union membership – survey respondents employed in private companies.

Source: Author, telephone survey, Lower Silesia, 2012–2014 (n = 1000).

Results do not add to 100% as multiple responses were allowed.

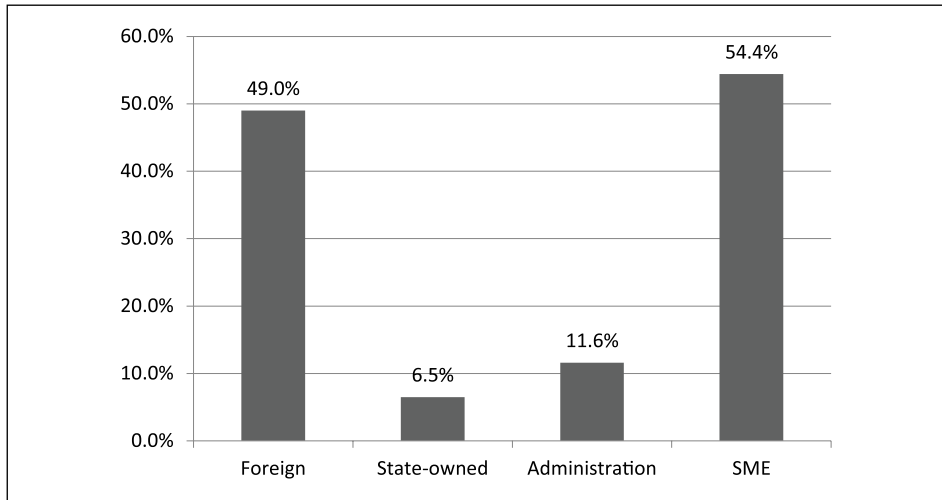


**Figure 4.** Forms of pressure on employer and manners of defending workers' interests applied at respondents' workplace.

Source: Author, telephone survey, Lower Silesia, 2012–2014 (n = 1000).

Multiple responses allowed.

at their workplaces next to staff employed on a full-time basis by the company. When there is a boom in the market and there are more orders for a given product/services, private companies – both small and large – decide to employ temporary workers from



**Figure 5.** Respondents reporting lack of any form of pressure on employers by workplace type.

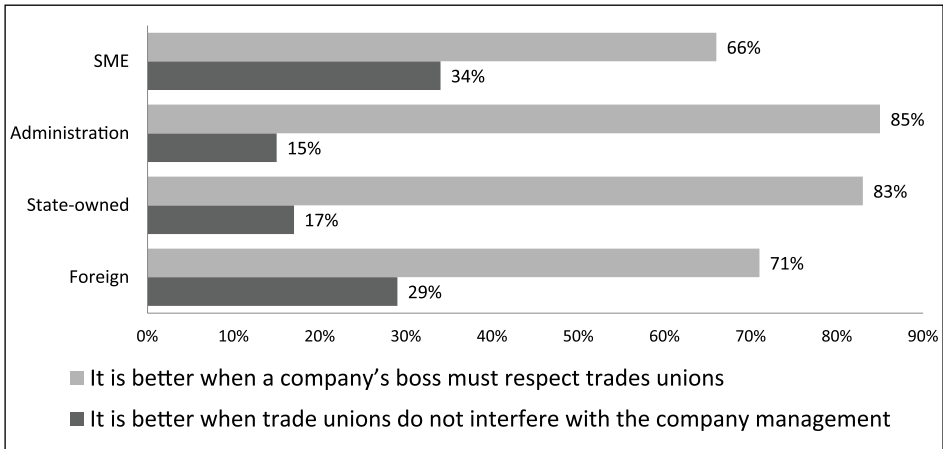
Source: Author, telephone survey, Lower Silesia, 2012–2014 (n = 1000).

employment agencies. Adjusting the number of staff to the supply for manufactured products makes it increasingly useful to acquire a ‘just in time’ workforce. It is provided by private employment agencies, which have grown rapidly in Poland. They are a manifestation of institutional changes in the Polish labour market and workforce privatisation. The primary objective of management is to reduce labour costs to the lowest possible levels. When ‘external staff’ are brought to the company, they increase internal competition and weaken bonds between employees even more. According to Urbański (2014), employment agencies

‘dismantle’ and ‘disorganize’ inefficient (in terms of capital and employers) labour market segments by introducing, among other things, staff turnover, segmentation and re-employment of redundant staff under new conditions. (p. 97)

The result is further privatisation of the labour market in which an individual employee exists as a separate entity and not as a part of an organised and collective social force. From the point of view of individual employees, this ever-changing working environment combined with competition increased by ‘external staff’ strongly impedes the formation of stable communities.

Although the surveyed employees generally wanted their boss to respect trades unions in their company, nearly one-third of those employed in the private sector still agreed that ‘it is better when trades unions do not interfere with their company management’ (Figure 6). In the private sector, in which even the wages of individual people employed in the same job positions are considered a taboo and they may vary considerably, there has often been a growing belief that it is better to keep a low profile in order to gain something. As Bauman (2001) notes, today, ‘remuneration tends to be set individually, promotion and demotions are no longer subject to impersonal rules, career tracks are anything but fixed; under the



**Figure 6.** Preferred relations with company executives by type of workplace.

Source: Author, telephone survey, Lower Silesia, 2012–2014 (n = 1000).

circumstances, individual competition matters more than joining forces with “other in similar conditions”.

Such privatisation of survival strategies, which prevents workers undertaking collective actions, not only leads to alienation but also loosens ties at work even more. This phenomenon may be illustrated by a statement expressed by one of the workers of the former ‘Viscoplast’ (today ‘3M’, renamed after privatisation):

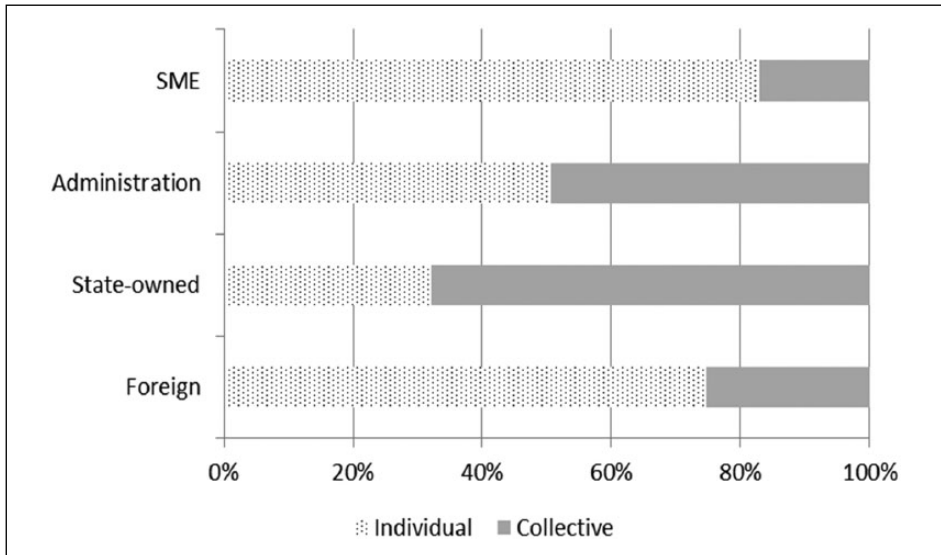
Today no person would defend another one at the plant. Today, everyone lives just for himself. This is tragic, this is the tragedy of this nation, such times have come that everyone closes up in his own cage, he is interested in his own gains and his own butt, there is no solidarity, even in his family, not to mention his work. (Cited in Żuk, 2008: 142)

Individualised resistance strategies are likely to be the result of the mentioned privatisation of operational strategies rather than staff satisfaction with the current situation – an instance of the incapacity to prefer what one has not experienced and hence cannot imagine, discussed by Kallaste and Woolfson (2009). Organised movements and collective actions (especially in private companies) are replaced with attempts to cope ‘on one’s own’. In large foreign private companies, only 25% of respondents believe that collective actions are more effective. In small- and medium-sized private companies, such opinions are even scarcer (17%). Only the public sector remains a place in which collective actions are more appreciated (Figure 7).

## The role of the state in resolving class conflicts, social mobilisation and egalitarian orientation

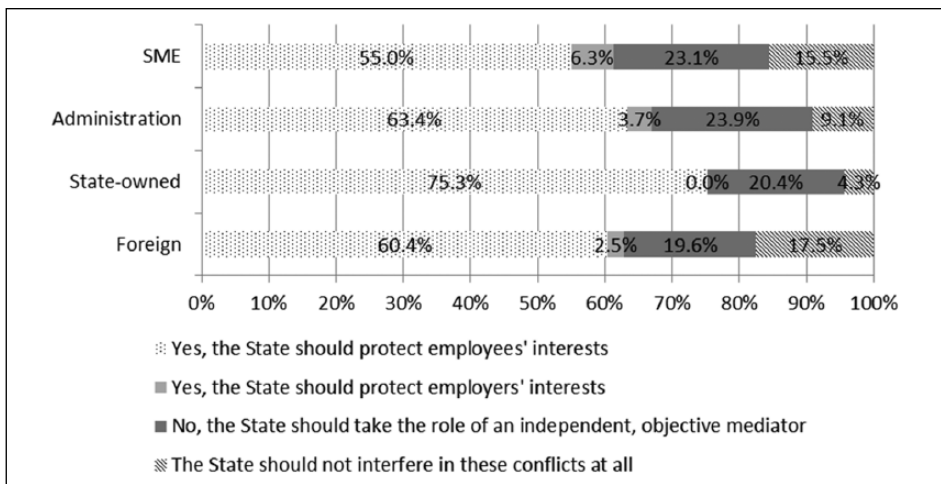
When analysing employees’ opinions on the role of the state, it is apparent that those employed in state plants and in the public sector in Poland continue to form the grounds for struggle for the welfare state in seeking to uphold the interests of working people.





**Figure 7.** Actions seen as more effective – group-oriented or individual: Responses by workplace type.

Source: Author, telephone survey, Lower Silesia, 2012–2014 (n = 1000).



**Figure 8.** Opinions on the role of the state in social conflicts by workplace type.

Source: Author, telephone survey, Lower Silesia, 2012–2014 (n = 1000).

Respondents from small and medium-sized Polish companies and foreign private companies are the most committed to the vision of a state as a neutral institution, or a state whose role is limited to that of a ‘watchman’ of market-liberal visions, one that does not interfere with the economy and social conflicts (Figure 8).

**Table 2.** Egalitarian orientation by type of workplace.

		Place of work				Total (n = 1000)
		Foreign (n = 250)	State (n = 250)	Administration (n = 250)	SME (n = 250)	
Income variances between different groups of people in Poland are – in your opinion:	Too little	5.2%	0.4%	3.7%	0.4%	2.4%
	Appropriate	21.7%	6.1%	6.6%	26.7%	15.3%
	Too large	73.1%	93.5%	89.8%	72.8%	82.3%

Source: Author, telephone survey, Lower Silesia, 2012–2014.  
SME: small and medium-sized enterprise.

Moreover, the Marxist principle stating that social existence shapes consciousness seems to work the other way round under Polish conditions: income inequalities are most often acceptable to those whose working conditions indicate that they should rather be most interested in promoting the egalitarian vision of society (Table 2). This may again be due to the fact that they cannot see any realistic socio-political alternative which could change their current position.

Another psychological explanation of this attitude can be the thesis that the frustration and dissatisfaction of workers from the private sector are not necessarily manifested through egalitarian demands and support for progressive movements. Survey results showed a correlation between the type of employment and political preferences before the 2015 parliamentary elections in Poland. In the pre-election period, Kukiz' 15 (the most populist group, including extreme right-wing candidates) was supported by 25% of voters employed for a definite period of time, 18% of those employed on the basis of civil-law contracts and 25% of people working in the black economy (CBOS, 2015). In the October 2015 parliamentary elections, this party was eventually supported by 9% of voters, but the percentage was apparently considerably higher for people employed on 'junk' contracts. These findings are consistent with Standing's (2011) analysis:

Some whose social and economic situations place them in the precariat ... are so anxious and insecure that they are easily seduced to support populist and authoritarian actions towards those depicted as a threat. ... [They] are lashing out because they have no politics of paradise to draw them in better directions'. (p. 153)

Table 3 indicates the extent to which respondents were willing to show support for staff protests. If we look at the extreme responses only (definitely yes and definitely not), we can see clear differences among people employed in the public sector, foreign private companies and small/medium-sized Polish companies. In the private sector, every fourth employee firmly refused to support potential staff protests. These results suggest that the labour environment in Poland has been broken, and the class of employees can be divided into at least several subcategories. The most conservative and passive of them are employed in the private sector.

**Table 3.** Would you support your colleagues at work if they defended workers’ rights (e.g. the right for decent wages)?

	Place of work				Total (n = 1000)
	Foreign (n = 250)	State (n = 250)	Administration (n = 250)	SME (n = 250)	
Definitely yes	33.3%	63.9%	54.4%	29.3%	45.1%
Rather yes	33.8%	34.8%	39.1%	36.0%	35.9%
Definitely no	6.5%	1.3%	5.1%	9.9%	5.7%
Rather no	26.4%	0.0%	1.4%	24.8%	13.3%

Source: Author, telephone survey, Lower Silesia, 2012–2014.  
SME: small and medium-sized enterprise.

### Conclusion

Differences in working conditions among different types of businesses mean not only different wages but also differences in workplace atmospheres, levels of staff commitment, degrees of trust towards colleagues and scopes of acceptance of infringement of workers’ rights.

Evidence has been provided that the private sector in Poland seems to present a major challenge for trades unions. The social practices, national laws or regulations imposed by entities that are responsible for institutionalising social dialogue in Poland – such as the former Trilateral Commission (composed of representatives of the government, employers and trades unions), and the Council for Social Dialogue, which was established in its place in October 2015 – do not address the everyday problems of those working in small and medium-sized private companies. There are usually no trades unions there, while many employees are under financial pressure, and so they work for wages below the official minimum, on ‘junk’ contracts and under conditions which do not comply with the provisions of the Labour Code.

Uninvolved workers and the lack of democratic solutions in such companies undermine the foundations of democracy because passive employees become passive citizens outside their workplace. Under the present circumstances, the most frustrated and isolated precarious employees can become the target of populist extreme right-wing movements. Dismantling the welfare state and undermining the industrial democracy create the foundations for a fear-driven society and state repression. The populist-nationalist Law and Justice (PiS) party won the 2015 parliamentary elections in Poland. The party promised to give Polish families a monthly allowance of PLN 500 (equivalent to €120) for every second and subsequent child, thereby winning an outright majority and taking full control of the country. This suggests that people deprived of social security will support authoritarian political solutions in exchange for a small amount of financial assistance.

Public-sector employees form the grounds for the protection of social rights, potential workers’ protests and Left civil movements in Poland. These environments, however, do not have their own political representation. Under these conditions, trades unions and labour movements are even more important. Those who are not able to resist the anonymous forces of global capitalism can best identify the source of

pressure at the local level: in their places of employment and residence (Žuk, 2011: 7). Such local strategies, however, can ultimately demand new ‘realistic utopias’ at the global level. Tadeusz Kowalik (2008) believes that in this context, the best alternative model to neoliberalism is ‘pragmatic’ market socialism advocated by James A. Yunker, or market socialism based on self-government inspired by Benjamin Ward’s concepts (pp. 19–48).

The protection of workplaces against privatisation translates into securing space for the development of grass-roots, voluntary and non-hierarchical social communities. A struggle for workplace democracy becomes a defence against the growth of nationalist forces and extreme right-wing groups. These feed on real problems: the lack of social security and excessive social inequalities. The power of the nationalist right has been built on unsolved social problems, economic crisis and the lack of workplace democracy.

### Acknowledgements

I thank the two anonymous referees and editorial staff for their useful comments on drafts of this article.

### Funding

This article received no specific grant from any funding agency. The data came from the author’s participation in research undertaken by the Social Monitoring and Civic Culture Centre in Wrocław in 2012–2014.

### Notes

1. The data came from the research conducted as part of the Social Monitoring and Civic Culture Centre’s activity in Wrocław in 2012–2014.
2. Statement gathered during focus group interviews with unionists from private foreign companies.

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